

Distraction, Multitasking, and Time Management

Technology isn't going anywhere. But multitasking — specifically media multitasking — is a concern. Some parents feel like kids may benefit from learning how to work around disruptions, since they're going to need this skill for their entire lives. On the other hand, research shows that media multitasking can have a negative impact on school performance.

- **Try an experiment.**

It's important to develop a strategy to help your kids focus and tune out distractions. If the strategy is successful, it can become a good habit. When you figure out what strategy you want to try (see the tip below for some ideas), propose an experiment. Say: "I've noticed that you get distracted by your phone during homework. I get distracted by my phone when I'm trying to work, too. Let's try an experiment." Then, explain the strategy you would like them to try. You may want to set a specific amount of time for the experiment as well (e.g., "We'll try this for three days" or "We'll try this on Tuesdays and Thursdays"). It can also be helpful to offer to try the experiment together — and doing a joint-experiment gives you an easy entry point for conversations during and after to explore what worked and what didn't.

- **Get some distance from the distraction.**

Many kids describe how a constantly buzzing cell phone distracts them from their work. But they have difficulty turning it off, for fear of missing out. After discussing it with your child, consider these solutions:

- **Get some physical distance from your phone.** Leave it in another room or put it in a drawer or box that isn't within arm's length.
- **Turn it on silent.** And keep the phone facedown on the table.
- **Take breaks for tech.** After a certain amount of homework time, or after an assignment is completed, take 15 minutes to check and respond to messages.

- **Try self-regulation apps to eliminate distractions.**

Learning to self-regulate is an essential skill. But kids often need support — and in fact, they often welcome tech solutions that help them manage their time. There are a number of apps designed to help people focus. Some apps let you block certain websites for a set amount of time. With others, you can whitelist and blacklist sites. For example, you can still use Wikipedia to read about mitosis, but you won't be able to get on Facebook. Some teens like such self-regulation apps because they are taking responsibility for setting rules for themselves. They allow teens to stay in the driver's seat, recognizing and managing the benefits and pitfalls of a 24/7 digital life.

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Digital Dilemmas are brief hypothetical situations and corresponding questions designed to foster cross-generational conversations about different aspects of adolescents' digital lives. Use this fictitious scenario, based on real-life stories, to spark a conversation at home with your children and open up the discussion about these very important topics.

Ticking Clock

Carrie was sitting at her family's dining room table studying for a history midterm that she had coming up. She promised herself 2 days ago that she was going to study for a couple hours each night until the exam, which was now the next day. Carrie really needed to do well on the test: at her school, the rule was that students could only compete in sports events if their grades were high enough. Carrie was supposed to play in tennis regionals at the end of the month, but she needed to boost her history grade by 8 points. The last couple of days were not very productive, so Carrie was really feeling the crunch. She tried to focus, but the material was just so boring. Before long, Carrie found herself scrolling through her newsfeed instead of her World War I study guide. Then, her phone buzzed next to her and she looked down and noticed she had 22 text messages in her group text. This was not going well. Carrie flipped her phone on silent, turned it upside down and decided to see if she could find any interesting history videos about World War I on YouTube. An hour later, Carrie had gotten totally pulled into a series of Epic Rap Battles of History, but had made no progress on her studies.

- ❓ Does this story seem realistic? Why or why not?
- ❓ Do you ever find yourself distracted when you're trying to do homework or study? What distracts you the most?
- ❓ What advice would you give to Carrie about how to minimize distractions and focus?
- ❓ Carrie turns her phone upside down to try and minimize the distraction. Is this a useful strategy? Why might it help (or not help)?